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## Creating value via collaboration

**Michael Cassop Thompson explores the role of user-generated content and, using the CIMSPA LinkedIn page as a case in point, wonders whether some of the value is in danger of being lost.**

I find myself increasingly fascinated with user-generated content (UGC), its nuances and how its use within various public discussions often results in value creation that transforms organisational practices and results. By way of example, a recent small contribution by a member of the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) on the CIMSPA LinkedIn page resulted in a discussion that led to an improvement in how that particular page was perceived and administered. This also illustrated how the democratisation of value creation – via UGC – may be utilised to benefit CIMSPA in the future (von Hippel, 2005). However, I do fear that the recent attempts to show that CIMSPA is listening may not be as enduring as the membership may desire. Nevertheless, by way of support for CIMSPA I hope my contributions made here will resonate with members, stimulate thought and perhaps facilitate more UGC of value for the organisation. It is CIMSPA though that must stimulate and nurture these ideas and, more importantly, provide the architecture for creating, harvesting and using such content consistently.

### Context

Within an overall context of what appeared to be member dissatisfaction with some aspects of CIMSPA business, comments – on a number of media vehicles – relating to the organisation’s membership engagement have become increasingly prominent over recent months. Despite this, in February a discussion on the CIMSPA LinkedIn page provided some hope of members having a voice – via UGC – to influence decision-making and create value for the organisation.

The discussion took place on the CIMSPA LinkedIn page. It concerned whether CIMSPA business should be discussed on a public page such as LinkedIn and whether it would be better to “move any discussions concerning CIMSPA to the members area of CIMSPA” (CIMSPA LinkedIn). This theme also mirrored concerns about the low traffic to the CIMSPA website forum, in contrast to the LinkedIn CIMSPA page with its 1,773 members and numerous threads and responses.

This initial post resulted in a response by this author that questioned the efficacy of such a move. I hoped my response would be seen for what it was, an attempt to generate polite discussion to enhance rather than attenuate the CIMSPA brand and provide insights pertaining to the support CIMSPA should offer members. I was also mindful that audiences are fragmented across multiple media and I was hoping that CIMSPA would expand – rather than contract – membership engagement across these channels (Chan-Olmsted, 2006).

These two initial LinkedIn page comments, which some might regard as trivial suggestions, resulted in a discussion that could be said to encompass many aspects of value creation where UGC results in changes in business practices. It is clear that for some members of the LinkedIn page the topic had resonance as the discussion generated related comments across a number of threads.

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**“I have some fears that the recognition of the value of the UGC on the example provided may be short-lived. Suggestions adopted in fragmented fashion as discrete units will simply lead to a dead end. What is preferable is that suitable architecture for supporting UGC be developed to consistently grow, harvest and act upon this material.”**

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## **Planned and unplanned communications**

The LinkedIn debate was interesting in that this was a classic example of unplanned communications where little control over the discussion could be exercised by CIMSPA itself. This was mainly due to the use of the media vehicle LinkedIn. This type of media vehicle and the public airing of UGC is an increasingly common facet of the digital age (Fill, 2009). A nother aspect brought into focus was how meaning-making on these media is polysemic and differing interpretations can take the discussion along discursive avenues (Finne and Gronroos, 2009). In fact, the discussion – which did result in changed perceptions and practices – could arguably be described as a simple misunderstanding of what was originally being suggested. Despite this, after considering the discussion the new interim chair of CIMSPA declared that:

“ the CIMSPA Forum should co-exist with the CIMSPA LinkedIn site”.

He also commented that:

“I have posted my member update on the [CIMSPA] Website this pm as it for members only at this stage.” The idea here is that the CIMSPA forum is for private business and LinkedIn for wider engagement .

These comments were welcome and the potential to develop this flow of traffic from the LinkedIn page to the CIMSPA website forum provides a significant opportunity if fully utilised. However, for the keen observer the content all came from the members themselves and their contributions on the LinkedIn discussions. It was simply nimble adoption of the UGC by the interim chair as he admirably captured the value created by the users. For this he should be commended. In fact, further innovation – provoked by the UGC – was in evidence immediately after the interim chair’s announcement. The CIMSPA communications company, City Desk, provided a link relating to the interim chair’s post via the LinkedIn page to the members’ area of the CIMSPA website.

This single discussion regarding LinkedIn, what should be said and where, and the subsequent actions taken by CIMSPA could be termed innovative value creation via UGC. Nevertheless, I do accept I am stretching the innovation concept a little. On the other hand, it was innovative for CIMSPA as this linking – no pun intended – of the LinkedIn and CIMSPA forum pages is a not common practice on the CIMSPA LinkedIn page. More importantly though, it highlights that UGC may be a fruitful source of value creation if the correct architecture and processes are developed for supporting these contributions. Kim et al., (2012. p.307; 317) comment that the:

“Quality of UGC is likely to be evaluated by the degree to which the structures for UGC are harmonised and unified in a way that is appealing to users... detailed planning of content, design and technology factors will be crucial for the creation of well-organised UGC services... in order to make UGC services beneficial for users, UGC value must be increased through extensive investment in content, design and technology”.

Stated simply, the membership’s value- creation endeavours – via their UGC contributions – must be adequately supported by CIMSPA.

## **From fear may come opportunity**

I have some fears that the recognition of the value of the UGC on the example provided may be short-lived. Suggestions adopted in fragmented fashion as discrete units will simply lead to a dead end. What is preferable is that suitable architecture for supporting UGC be developed to consistently grow, harvest and act upon this material. UGC could also be used to create value in other areas of CIMSPA

business. Examples already exist where value- creating UGC on the LinkedIn page has been produced. Many eminent members have offered assistance and advice – pro bono publico – to what appears to be an organisation requiring additional resources. Sadly, it also appears these kind offers have gone untapped and they remain suspended in cyber space receiving no response from CIMSPA. If these offers of help and advice are being accepted, then the public relations value of these collaborations is not being exploited to raise the profile of the CIMSPA brand or to encourage others to contribute content. In future who will offer help and advice if no response is evident?

The idea of the customer or member as a value- creator – via UGC – will be lost if CIMSPA does not provide the appropriate architecture for supporting the potential value creation inherent in UGC. I offer this article as a starting point. The article itself – published here – serves as an example of how UGC takes it s own path and permeates other realms. In this case, it has broadened a LinkedIn discussion to reach a different audience via another media vehicle: The Leisure Review. I am sure multiple interpretations will be made of its content. This meaning making may result in dialogue across other media vehicles , which one hopes will stimulate other value- creating content of benefit to CIMSPA. Of course, it will require CIMSPA themselves to create suitable architecture and processes to make the most of this content, and engage and be involved in the dialogue; perhaps at a greater level than is currently in evidence.

## **Conclusion**

Gidhagen et al., (2011. p.403) suggest that “providers should inspire users to deploy their knowledge... facilitate interaction among users... [and] attend to users deployment of their knowledge and skills”.In CIMSPA’s case I see significant scope for development. This not only applies to the LinkedIn page but also in the wider context of CIMSPA membership engagement. This identification of room for development – rather than a criticism – is an opportunity to harness the value- creation potential of content provided by a keen and willing audience. This audience should not be expected to contribute UGC as an act of faith or a duty; rather they should be stimulated by the actions of CIMSPA to support, encourage and engage with the UGC provided by a highly professional, committed, and willing group of creative collaborators.

**Dr Michael Cassop Thompson Ph.D, MBA, DMS, CMS, BA (Hons), BSc, ILAM (DIP), F.IMSPA can be contacted at [mct114@hotmail.com](mailto:mct114@hotmail.com), LinkedIn or [twitter@Drmct114](https://twitter.com/Drmct114)**

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